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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that the goals and evaluative standards held by young children are influenced by developmental factors and the classroom context. This study investigated the goals held by first grade students as they undertake classroom activities and the criteria by which they evaluate their work. The larger purpose was to explore the specificity of goals and standards in classrooms for young children and the ways in which teachers help students construct functional views of classroom expectations. The subjects were 19 students attending a pre-K and first grade school located on a southeastern military base. Data were collected through weekly observations and through individual student interviews in which subjects were asked why they chose to complete certain learning centers within the classroom and also to evaluate work from their portfolio. The results indicated that classroom practices and teacher statements were influential in students' perception of goals and standards in their classroom. In addition, different students described different criteria, suggesting that there was not uniformity in the class's understanding of standards. High achievers were more likely than low achievers to make evaluative differentiations among subject areas such as math, writing, and art. It appeared that many standards were inferred by the students on the basis of teacher feedback and whether or not work (for example, math versus art) was checked for accuracy. (Contains 27 references.) (MOK)

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Children's Goals and Standards for Work: Evaluation in a First Grade Classroom

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Interest in young children's academic goals, criteria for success, and self-evaluative processes has been renewed by motivational theories that stress their importance (e.g., Bandura, 1989; Locke & Latham, 1994;) and by the growing use of portfolios, which involve students in assessing their work and documenting their progress (e.g., Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991). Impetus also comes from public policy initiatives that require instruction to be focused on specific standards and assessed for the extent to which students meet them.

Research indicates that the goals and evaluative standards held by young children are influenced by developmental factors and the classroom context (e.g., Ames, 1992; Stipek & MacIver, 1989). Since children in the early school years rely on adults to provide standards, the role of the teacher is central. Teachers are advised to stress mastery goals rather than those that focus upon performance, and to provide specific goals and standards that will guide performance rather than giving general admonitions to "do your best" (e.g., Ames 1992; Schunk, 1991).

Little is known about how goals and standards actually operate and are understood in primary grade classrooms. While anecdotal reports indicate that young children are able to self-reflect and discuss criteria (Lamme & Hysmith 1991; Voss, 1991), teachers often remark on children's difficulties in self-evaluating. Young children may state criteria different from the teachers (e. g., "I had fun doing this") or focus on criteria that the teacher considers minor. Even before the widespread use of portfolios, Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Meece & Wessels (1982) remarked on this problem, describing elementary school students' difficulties in identifying the purposes of assignments and thus knowing that they have accomplished them. The failure of kindergarten and first-grade teachers to communicate (and children to

understand) the learning goals present in assignments has been described as a gap in their achievement socialization (Marshall, 1994). However, research suggests that young children may not use information on goals and standards as older children and adults do (Ruble, Eisenberg, & Higgins 1994; Stipek & Mac Iver, 1989; Veroff, 1969) and that this helps them to maintain their optimistic motivation (Bjorklund & Green, 1992). Thus clearly defined standards may be less appropriate for children of this age than for older students. In addition, teachers of young children may not present clear academic standards because they wish to avoid discouraging students and because their need to stress standards for behavioral conformity is more pressing.

The developmental level of these young students is central to our consideration of what sort of student goals are "best" in terms of facilitating their effort and achievement. Especially at issue is the way in which the large body of work on performance versus mastery standards might apply to first graders. Smiley and Dweck (1994) found that kindergarten and first grade children hold identifiable performance or mastery goals which are associated with the same desirable or undesirable achievement behaviors seen in older children. Importantly, in this study students were not required to verbally express these goals; rather they indicated them by task selection behaviors and verbalizations consistent with each kind of goal. It appears that first-graders have difficulty in specifying the extent to which their goals are oriented toward mastery or performance, and so the ways in which they and their teachers communicate about these goals is of interest.

This study investigates the goals and evaluative standards held by first grade students. Using interview and observational data, it examines the goals students have as they undertake classroom activities and the criteria by which they evaluate their work. A larger purpose is to explore the specificity of goals and standards in classrooms for young children and the ways teachers help students construct functional views of classroom expectations.

Methods and Data Source

Subjects. The students in this study attended a pre-K to 1st grade school located on a southeastern military base. All of the 19 students in a first-grade classroom, 9 boys and 10 girls, 9 African-American, 8 white, and 2 Hispanic, were interviewed at the end of their first grade year. The median split method was used on student scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test in order to differentiate students into groups of higher and lower achievers. The classroom was child-centered, and included frequent discussions about goals, achievements, and students' self-evaluative views. Much instruction took place at centers chosen by students within teacher guidelines. A limited portfolio system consisted of individual boxes in which children placed specific work samples; children reviewed their work, but seldom discussed it.

Interview procedures. Each student was individually interviewed by an adult familiar to the students, using an informal but uniform procedure similar to a teacher conference. After describing why they had selected each of their centers that morning and telling how they knew they had done a good job in general and on a picture, on a paper, and in math, students selected 2 texts and 2 pictures from their portfolios. After ranking one paper as best and one as second best, students were asked the reasons for their choice; this process was repeated for their pictures. Finally, students were asked how they knew they had improved as readers.

Data Treatment. Interview notes were typed immediately following interviews. Criteria for paper selections were coded using a category system developed by McCormick, Busching & Potter (1992), and those for pictures were coded using a system adapted from that described by Hart & Goldin-Meadow (1984), using standard procedures for assuring inter-rater reliability. A content-driven approach was used to develop the category system for other responses.

Observation: Classroom observations were conducted weekly throughout the year. The observer circulated among centers informally giving assistance as needed, and sat out of view while recording classroom discussions.

Results

Both observations and interviews yielded information about ways in which evaluative standards operated in this classroom. First, observations that describe classroom practices will be summarized. Then, information from student interviews will be given.

Observations

Classroom practices and teacher statements frequently related to classroom evaluation and were influential in students' perceptions of goals and standards in their classroom. The following major themes related to evaluation, goals, and standards were observed:

1. Classroom evaluation and recognition routines There were subject matter differences in the emphasis placed on accuracy and accomplishments. Completed math work was to be brought to the teacher for individual correction and assistance. The need to correctly spell words in texts was more ambiguous, and children often voiced concern about spelling accuracy. While the teacher sometimes wrote words to be used in specific texts (e.g. "Valentines Day) on the board, and many words were permanently displayed on cards on a classroom wall, students were also often told to spell words as they thought best. In contrast to math, texts and pictures were rarely critiqued, although the teacher often asked students to read or display them for the group. Public recognition and positive feedback (applause) from the group was given for such work that was shared in grouptime.
2. Goal-setting and evaluation The teacher stressed the importance of children setting their own goals and reflecting and self-evaluating what they had learned and accomplished. The teacher downplayed her role as evaluator, saying she would like

them all to be able to say " I feel I have done as much as I can". She told them, "Forget Ms. Jones - this is not about me but about what YOU can do."

3. Failure Mistakes and failure to meet goals were presented as permissible and an expected part of learning: "There are no mistakes in first grade". Children were told to do their best and that improvement was important: "If you didn't get to your third center, big deal!" "If you say 'I didn't finish', say why, so you can look and see what you can do." However, if failures to complete work were due to misbehavior or punishment that prevented working, students were reminded of their responsibility to complete their work: "In this class you make decisions and choices".

4. Difficulty of standardized test Although level of difficulty of work was occasionally noted, it was not a frequent theme. The teacher's helpfulness when students had problems and her occasional modification of a troublesome task suggested an implicit contract that the teacher would present students only with tasks they could master. An exception was the difficulty of a standardized test given at the end of the year, which had many items requiring skills the children did not have. The teacher told students she did not like this test. When one child volunteered during group time that he had done his best on the test, the teacher responded to the group, "You all did your best - don't worry about it, its over now."

5. Cheating Cheating or copying was not discussed except in relation to the standardized test, when students were given cover sheets and told not to copy. Although the correctness of children's answers to problems at the math center were used by the teacher to assess individual skill levels, children freely shared answers to such problems, appearing to unknowingly subvert the center's instructional purpose (Marshall, 1994) in the service of helpfulness and friendship.

Center selection: goals for activities

Students were asked which centers they had selected that day (or a prior day, if necessary) and why they had picked each of the specific centers they named. The reason (Table 1) given most frequently (61% of the time) was that they liked doing the activities in the center (e.g., "I like to write stories."), with the opportunity to learn something next most commonly cited (18% of responses). Students selected different centers for different reasons; enjoyment of the activity was the only reason given for selecting the computer and manipulatives centers, and was also frequently given as a reason for choosing the language or writing center (80%), the science center (67%) and the math (50%) and art (50%) centers. The goal of learning was most often used for the book center, with 36% of students citing some aspect of improving their reading as their reason for selecting this center (e.g., "So I'll be smart when I go to second grade and I know how to read") and was also a frequent (30%) reason for choosing the math center. Learning was never the reason students picked the art, manipulatives, computer, or listening centers. "Finishing" was also cited as a reason for selecting a center, and was used most often for the art center, where students were completing the elaborate project of making a pinata. It was used by 2 children for reading, where finishing a book was their goal. The relative infrequency of "finishing" responses (given the teacher's frequent mention of the goal of finishing a center task) is probably because few center activities required more than one visit. The use of this goal might vary as different projects are undertaken at centers.

Gender differences were seen, with learning comprising 27% of boys' reasons for selecting a center and 10% of girls' reasons. Finishing was cited 15% of the time for boys, and 6% for girls. Thus learning and finishing they comprised 42% of the boys' responses and 16% of those of girls. In contrast, 71% of girls' responses (compared to 50% of boys') involved liking to do the center activity or finding it fun.

Achievement differences in center selection were also seen, with the 5 students who scored highest on their Metropolitan test more often citing liking to do an activity (64% of reasons) than the 5 lowest scorers (43% of reasons). High scorers were less likely to cite needing to finish something (8% vs. 38% of low scorers), perhaps reflecting more direction given by the teacher to low scorers.

First-graders' approach to mastery and performance goals is addressed by these findings. Choosing a center because it is fun or one likes to do the activities appeared to indicate a mastery goal in these children, consistent with Ames's (1992) characteristics of mastery-promoting tasks: novelty, variety, diversity, and student interest. In contrast, since the teacher kept track of reading book progress, finishing a book suggested a performance goal: "I want to finish my long book, I have one more story". A learning goal sometimes indicated a performance orientation, as when a child said she went to the math center "so I'll know my math very well, and I'll know when my teacher asks me and I can do my tests". At other times learning goals seemed to indicate a genuine interest in mastery, as when a child selected the science center to "to get to learn about smell" or chose the math center because "it makes you think a lot".

Interestingly, the teacher was most pleased to see students selecting a center in order to do an enjoyable activity; she was especially pleased with choices made for reasons such as "I like math and it makes you think a lot," or "The science center has stuff I like to do," but wasn't pleased with students choosing math to learn "to do tests" or "to get to the times." Her favored reasons were thus mastery reasons rather than those that focused on performance.

How children reported they generally evaluate their work

When asked how they generally decided if they had done a good job on their classroom work, children most often (Table 2, 48% of responses) reported they used their

own judgment, and next most often said they relied on the teacher's judgment (23% of responses). They discriminated among work areas in their responses, reporting using their own judgment more frequently to evaluate their pictures (68% of responses) than their stories (50%), and least often for math (22%).

The reliance on teacher versus child judgment corresponds to the criteria students used to assess their work (Table 3). They regarded doing correct or accurate work as the appropriate criteria most often for math (65% of math responses), next most often for stories (33%), and least often for pictures (12%). No systematic differences were seen in these processes or criteria by ethnicity or gender, although there was a trend for higher achieving children to report reliance on their own judgment and the use of a "correct work" criterion. Many students appeared to have difficulty answering these general questions about customary class procedures, and high achievers were more likely to give a codable response to them.

Children's differentiation of areas makes a good deal of sense, and undoubtedly reflects their classroom experience; the teacher seldom critiqued pictures and only occasionally praised them, but she did frequently read over papers and make approving comments. The area of math was unique in that the teacher often checked work and assisted children in reexamining answers that were in error. Therefore, we were interested in seeing which children were in the minority as not indicating that the criteria for assessing math achievement was "rightness". An examination of the lowest and highest scoring children on the mathematics portion of the Metropolitan tests suggests that higher scoring children are far more likely to use the correctness standard for math achievement, while low scoring children were more likely to give idiosyncratic or non-specific processes or criteria despite interviewer probes (e.g. "So when I get older").

Surprisingly, no comparative standards were mentioned by any student, despite prior research that suggests this is possible (Ruble, Eisenberg, and Higgins, 1994). Perhaps this

was due to the teachers' discouraging of competition and encouragement of cooperation and assistance.

Criteria children used for selecting their best written paper

After having been asked to decide which of two selected written papers in their portfolio was best or second best, students most often reported using as their criteria surface features such as length or neatness (26% of responses), personal associations to the text such as "I didn't like having a broken arm" (26% of responses), and the topic of the story (23%). This is consistent with findings from developmental investigations of the criteria students apply to writing (Applebee, 1978; Hilgers, 1986; Newkirk, 1982; McCormick, Busching, & Potter, 1992), which found a progression in this age group from affectively-based egocentric criteria to rule-oriented surface aspects (such as neatness and length) and only later to multiple criteria based on craftsmanship of the text. No clear trends for gender or achievement level were seen in this small sample, in contrast to the clear achievement level differences seen among fifth graders in prior research (McCormick, Busching, & Potter, 1992). However, high achievers were slightly more likely to select a text as best due to their personal associations to it. This was also the criterion cited by the teacher as one she preferred, since she saw it as indicating the personal investment that would make writing more enjoyable and encourage students' skill development. Low achievers also used a few more surface criteria ("this one is longer" or "this one is messy") than high achievers.

Agreement in selection of best text. A recurring issue in portfolio assessment is whether work samples students select to include as their "best" really do represent their highest level achievements. In this case, the validity of the students' choice of "best" text was usually corroborated by teacher agreement. For 15 of the students it was possible to ask the teacher to herself rank the two texts the children had ranked. The teacher selected the same text as best for 11 students, and two of the four disagreements involved stories children

had ranked second due to negative personal associations with the content.

Criteria children used for selecting their best picture

When asked to decide which of two selected pictures in their portfolio was best or second best, students most often reported using as their criteria their general assessment of the image, especially whether they considered it pretty (34% of responses, see Table 4). Next most frequently reported criteria were the topics of the pictures or student associations to the topics (21% of responses) and specific aspects of artistic composition, such as use of colors or number of figures (also 21% of responses). These findings are generally consistent with those of Hart & Goldin-Meadow (1984). There were some interesting group differences in criteria used; four high achieving white boys used the criteria of accuracy to assess their drawings while no other child mentioned it. Perhaps these were spatially skilled children who had focused on artistic production and had therefore constructed the more sophisticated standard of verisimilitude to guide their efforts in this area. Low achievers used picture topic or association to picture topic as a criterion far more often than did high achieving children (31% vs. 12.5%).

Criteria children used to judge reading improvement

Although all children had clearly improved their reading skills during the year, many had difficulty saying how they knew they were getting to be better readers. Their difficulty is consistent with literature suggesting that young children would find it easier to develop and apply criteria for a specific and concrete example of achievement (such as a picture) than to a vague prior accomplishment such as reading improvement (Heckhausen, 1982). Forty-four percent gave rather vague responses that described their reading activities, typically "I read a lot" (see Table 5). (When the interviewer probed, students reported they had been told that practicing reading would bring improvement.) A few children, all high achievers, reported the book they were in ("I'm in the fourth book - no, that's the fifth

book!") or other evidence of improvement (e. g., "I'm more faster" or "I know a lot of hard words"). Low achievers more often used the judgments of other people ("People say so" or "I sound better, Ms. J. says").

Discussion

While this study provides only descriptive data on a single small sample, it does provide naturalistic corroboration for some prior developmental findings, raises issues about others, and indicates the importance of the classroom context in socialization of achievement goals and standards. Almost all students could readily respond to questions regarding goals and standards and discriminated among achievement areas in their responses. This is encouraging, and suggests that classroom discussion of self-evaluation, even when specific standards are not given, is useful in developing self-evaluative skills. Discussions of standards had not impaired the self-efficacy of these students, many of whom spontaneously gave positive evaluations of their work (e. g., "I do good in everything"). Different students did describe different criteria, suggesting that there was not uniformity in the class's understanding of standards. It appears that many standards were inferred by the students on the basis of teacher feedback and whether or not work from a center (e. g., math versus art) was checked for accuracy.

The teacher's efforts directed toward the central task of socializing first graders to the expectations and obligations of "real" school (Blumenfeld, Hamilton, Wessels & Falkner 1979; Dreeben, 1968; Jackson, 1968) were clear in the observations. We see clearly the difficult balance between cheering first graders on and teaching them about the external standards that will increasingly be applied to their work. The teacher tried to maintain this balance as she told students "Do your best". Students' solemn reception of the teacher's achievement-related directives that they work hard and complete their work to the best of their ability suggest that they saw these requirements as moral in nature. This blending of

moral, behavioral, and academic imperatives was consistent with the findings (Heyman, Dweck, & Cain, 1992) that 5- and 6-year old children saw school accomplishments as indicating one's goodness or badness and that young children incorporate information on work habits and effort as they assign ability ratings to their classmates (Stipek & Tannatt, 1984).

There were some ways in which the special features of this particular classroom were evident in students' perceptions. Students appeared motivated and were overwhelmingly positive about their abilities, features consistent with prior research (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995) on child-centered kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Students mentioned learning goals second most often as their reason for going to a center, consistent with Marshall's (1994) finding that students in a classroom that offered them choices about what activities they would do were likely to be aware of the learning goals of the activities. And one puzzle about this data - how students present in the same classroom could differ as they did on their perceptions of criteria used to judge their work - was addressed by a study on socialization of first graders (Blumenfeld, Hamilton, Wessels & Falkner, 1979) which found that socializing interactions were more individualized in open classrooms.

While researchers suggest that it is best for students to be aware of learning goals for their activities and to perceive meaningful reasons for what they do in class (Ames, 1992; Marshall, 1994), it appeared that in this classroom explicitly stated goals were associated with less positive behaviors. Such clearly stated goals were most often performance goals that involved impressing others. In contrast, students who gave more vague rationales for center choice such as wanting to do the activities there appeared to be expressing mastery goals. This interpretation is supported the finding that higher achieving children more often give this seemingly less goal-oriented reason. Also, the teacher believed it best for students to choose a center because they liked to do the activity, rather than because they wished to

learn or complete a task.

An issue which was not resolved in this study is that of the direction of development in goals and standards for work in early elementary school. What is a sophisticated evaluative response, and how do children construct them? If one looks at achievement levels as an indicator of mature responses, some patterns are clear. High achievers are more likely to give codable responses to questions about general classroom achievement and to have made differentiations among the achievement areas of math, writing, and art in who evaluates work and the criteria used. Specifically, children who decided they had done a good job on their math by looking to the teacher's judgment of correctness were better mathematicians than those who gave other responses (e. g., "Show your parents, they'll be happy" or "I write neatly"). And only high achieving students picked their best picture on the basis of drawing accuracy, while others used as criteria the topic of their picture or their associations to the topic. It appears that students who pursue mastery in an area construct more precise criteria to guide them.

Despite students' failure to state comparative standards and the teacher's having discouraged children from comparing themselves with others, some children displayed a competitively-charged performance orientation. For example, one child described his 16 page (and growing) text on his cat, which he confided would be sent on to second grade before him as an indicator of his competence. And children vied for the opportunity to present their work to the group and be rewarded by the customary hand-clapping, several mentioning this public acclaim as evidence of success.

An important and related issue is the kind of standards and goals it is best for children to hold. We know that some achievement-related cognitions are better for children than others - e. g., holding an incremental theory of intelligence and an effort-based attribution for success and failure. But, is it better for a child to select a center to learn something, to

finish something, or because it presents a chance to do an enjoyable activity (e. g., because "I love to write stories")? For children of this age, are specific goals better than trying to do one's best? And, do choices of work as best because "I like it" represent a more functional standard than "because it is neat" or "because the answers are right"? Might vague and self-enhancing autonomous standards be more supportive of young children's achievement than those that are clear and curriculum bound? Although teachers probably should communicate goals and standards more clearly (Blumenfeld et al., 1982; Marshall, 1994), this may not be useful for young students, whose optimistic zest for school is in part attributable to their naive views about their abilities and prospects for success. It seems that the process of self-reflection, in which children construct their own evaluative schema and goals, is preferable to a more didactic approach to teaching the criteria for being a good student. Further research is needed (see Blumenfeld, 1992) to assess the relationship of specific teacher-dictated goals to the achievement of young students, but this study suggests that informing young children about specific curricular goals and externally defined standards would be counter-productive.

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Table 1
Student Reasons for Picking Centers by Center Type

Reason	Center Type: Science	Art	Book	Manipulative	Math	Language and Writing	Computer	Listening	Total for all centers
I need to	1 (17)	-	1 (9)	-	2 (20)	-	-	1 (20)	5 (9)
I like to do things there	4 (67)	4 (50)	4 (36)	3 (100)	5 (50)	8 (80)	4 (100)	3 (60)	35 (61)
To learn	1 (17)	-	4 (36)	-	3 (30)	2 (20)	-	-	10 (18)
To finish some thing	-	4 (50)	2 (18)	-	-	-	-	-	6 (10)
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1 (20)	1 (2)
Total respon ses	6	8	11	3	10	10	4	5	57

Number in parenthesis is percentage of column.
n=19; Each student had 3 choices.

Table 2
Students' Basis for Deciding if They Have Done a Good Job on Work, by Work Area

Basis for judgment	General work	Picture	Written Paper	Math	Total for all work areas
My judgment	4 (57)	13 (68)	9 (50)	4 (22)	30 (48%)
Teacher's judgment	3 (43)	1 (5)	3 (17)	7 (39)	14 (23%)
Other students' judgment	-	2 (11)	2 (11)	1 (5)	5 (8%)
Objective evidence	-	-	1 (5)	1 (5)	2 (3%)
Other	-	3 (16)	3 (17)	5 (28)	11 (18%)
Total responses	7	19	18	18	62

n=19; Number in parenthesis is percentage of column.

Table 3
Criteria Students Report They Use to Assess Work, by Work Area

Criterion	General work	Picture	Written Paper	Math	Total for all work areas
Correctness or accuracy	2 (28)	2 (12)	6 (33)	11 (65)	21 (36)
Non-specific (e. g. if good, pretty)	5 ((71)	9 (56)	6 (33)	1 (6)	21 (26)
Surface feature (e. g. neatness)	-	-	3 (17)	1 (6)	4 (7)
Other	-	5 (31)	3 (17)	4 (23)	12 (21)
Total responses	7	16	18	17	58

n=19; Number in parenthesis is percentage of column.

Table 4
Criteria Students Reported They Use to Assess Pictures, by Achievement Level

Criterion	Low achievers (n=8)	High achievers (n=8)	Total (n=16)
Topic or association to topic	4 (31)	2 (12)	6 (21)
Accuracy	-	4 (25)	4 (14)
General Quality	5 (38)	5 (31)	10 (34)
Process of drawing	1 (8)	2 (12)	3 (10)
Composition qualities	3 (23)	3 (19)	6 (21)
TOTAL	13	16	29

Number in parenthesis is percentage of column.
Each student had two response opportunities.
Only students who had taken Metropolitan test are reported.

Table 5
Criteria Children Reported They Use to Verify Reading Improvement, by Achievement Level

Criterion	Low achievers (n=8)	High achievers (n=8)	Total (n=16)
Reading activities	5 (63)	2 (25)	7 (44)
Level of book	-	2 (25)	2 (12)
Other evidence	-	3 (37)	3 (19)
Teacher or others say improved	3 (37)	1 (12)	4 (25)
TOTAL	8	8	16

Number in parenthesis is percentage of column.
Only students who had taken Metropolitan test are reported.